A LIBRARIAN'S GUIDE TO DARK HORSE COMICS

Michael R. Lavin

Dark Horse Comics publishes one of the most consistently diverse lines of comics in America today. Included in the Dark Horse list are genres as varied as adult humor, detective noir, realistic fiction, fantasy, science fiction, horror, movie adaptations, realistic drama, historical fiction, Japanese manga, and the occasional super-hero title. A list of regular contributors to Dark Horse books reads like a Hall of Fame of American comics creators: Paul Chadwick, Harlan Ellison, Frank Miller, Arthur Adams, John Byrne, Mike Allred, Dave Gibbons, Mike Mignola, Steve Rude, Sergio Aragones, Matt Wagner, Steven Seagle, and Stan Sakai, to name a few. Year after year, Dark Horse has won more than its fair share of Eisners and Harveys, the industry's most prestigious awards.[1] The company's original graphic novels are also recognized for their outstanding quality and include such stunning titles as Brian Talbot's *Tale of One Bad Rat* and Joe Kubert's *Fax from Sarajevo*. To top it off, Dark Horse is the fourth largest comics publisher in America, excluding the newsstand sales of Archie Comics. Not bad for a publisher barely twelve years old.

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DARK HORSE IS BORN

In 1985, ardent comic book fan Mike Richardson decided the time had come to realize his dream of starting his own comics company. He had already turned a

small science-fiction bookstore in Oregon into a regional chain of comic book stores. For years, Richardson had also been involved in the Amateur Press Association (APA) movement, where comic book fans shared their artwork, fan fiction, and comics criticism with one another via self-published newsletters. Through the APA and various comics conventions, Richardson met Randy Stradley, who he recruited to help with the fledgling Dark Horse Comics. By the following year, the duo was ready to turn their dreams into action. Richardson would serve as publisher, with Stradley as executive editor.[2]

The stated goals of Dark Horse Comics were to publish quality material which would appeal to adult readers, and to work together with artists and writers, allowing them to retain the rights to their own creations. Richardson and Stradley called upon a number of friends they had made through the APA movement, and who were now working for major comics publishers. These young writers and artists, who were just beginning their professional careers, included Mark Badger, Chris Warner, Paul Chadwick, Mark Verheiden, Randy Emberlin, and James Dean Smith. Chadwick had been trying to sell one of his ideas to the major comics publishers, but no one was biting. Stradley persuaded the young writer/artist to use his character, called Concrete, in a short story which Dark Horse would publish in its first title, a bimonthly black & white anthology series to be called *Dark Horse Presents* (*DHP*).[3]

The first issue of *DHP* (cover date July 1986) featured the first appearance of Chadwick's Concrete, plus three other stories: a gentle super-hero fable ("Brighter!") also by Chadwick, a gritty adult war story ("Black Cross") written and drawn by Chris Warner, and an engaging science fiction piece ("Mindwalk") written by Stradley with art by Emberlin. The first issue was a success, selling 50,000 copies in two printings, five times the publisher's projected figures. In particular, "Concrete" was an immediate hit, generating interest among fans and other publishers alike.

Seeking to recruit James Dean Smith to draw for *DHP*, Richardson agreed to publish Smith's three-issue super-hero parody entitled *Boris the Bear*. The first issue, entitled "Boris the Bear Slaughters the Teenage Radioactive Black Belt Mutant Ninja Critters," capitalized on comic fandom's growing disgust over the endless parade of anthropomorphic knock-offs of the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. *Boris* sold 80,000 copies, and Dark Horse had its second hit.

Movie Monsters, Japanese Comics, and Super-Heroes

In 1987, Richardson used some of his profits to buy the comic book rights to "Godzilla," a then inactive property. Soon after, he purchased the rights to another fairly inactive license, the "Aliens" creatures from the Ridley Scott movies. The first issue of the six-part *Aliens* mini-series, by Mark Verheiden and Mark Nelson, became Dark Horse's biggest hit yet, selling 300,000 copies and undergoing six printings.[4] The next licensed property, based on the "Predator" movie, was purchased in 1989. The third mainstay of Dark Horse's ongoing line of licensed properties is its *Star Wars* series, which began in 1991. Marvel Comics previously owned the comic book rights to perpetuity, but agreed to give them up after encountering creative difficulties.

Since then, Dark Horse has licensed a seemingly endless array of characters, with varying success. The list includes cartoon characters, such as G.I. Joe and Jonny Quest; TV characters, such as Young Indiana Jones; movie adaptations, such as Lost in Space, Robocop, The Terminator, and Starship Troopers; and pulp-fiction heroes such as Tarzan, Doc Savage, and The Shadow. The publisher's next big licensing project, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, will be an ongoing series based on the hit movie and TV series of the same name. Based on the initial fan reaction, *Buffy* will likely be quite successful.

Dark Horse also imports and translates an extensive line of Japanese comics, called manga, in partnership with Studio Proteus. Although Japanese comics are not tremendously popular in the United States, a core group of avid fans enjoy manga and anime (Japanese animation). Dark Horse, together with Japanese publisher Viz Communications, are the two largest publishers of manga in the US. Because Japanese is read from right to left, comic book translations employ a mirror-image printing technique or use a cut-and-paste method in the pre-printing process to reverse the order of panels on each page.

Among the many titles in Dark Horse's manga line are *Drakuun*, *Gunsmith Cats*, *The Dirty Pair*, *Oh My Goddess!*, and *The Legend of Mother Sarah*. Most, like *Oh My Goddess!*, are translations of previously published Japanese books, while a few, such as *The Dirty Pair*, are American titles drawn in the Japanese style. Manga titles often feature sexy female protagonists. Common subgenres include science fiction, fantasy, contemporary humor, and violent samurai action.

In the early 1990s, several comics publishers had made a splash by creating brand new collections of super-heroes whose adventures crossed over from one character's title to the next. Based on the success of rival independents such as Image, Valiant, and Malibu, Richardson decided that Dark Horse should also try its hand at creating a self-contained super-hero "universe." The company had already made occasional forays into the "adult" super-hero genre, most notably with *John Byrne's Next Men*, but with less than spectacular results. In 1993, Dark Horse unveiled its new universe in a sixteen-part limited series modestly called *Comics' Greatest World*. Among its many characters were a masked vigilante named X, a female bounty hunter named Barb Wire, and a vengeful female spirit appropriately called Ghost. Following the limited series, each of the most popular characters received a title of his or her own. With the exception of *Ghost*, which is still published, and Barb Wire, who continues to make guest appearances now and then, none of the characters caught on in a lasting manner.

Dark Horse has also been involved in several movie projects based on its own characters, notably "The Mask," "Timecop," "Dr. Giggles," and "Barb Wire." Of these, "The Mask" was particularly successful at the box office, while "Timecop" did fairly well.

The Creator-Owned Tradition

Today, most casual comics fans know Dark Horse for its adaptations of licensed properties, notably its *Aliens*, *Predator*, and *Star Wars* series, but the company deserves credit for much more. Creator-owned publications are the heart and soul of Dark Horse Comics, and the company has attracted an impressive roster of new projects by promising writers and artists they could retain the rights to their creations. In addition to recruiting these newly-created comics characters in this manner, Dark Horse has also lured existing titles from now-defunct publishers or rival firms.[5] Examples of the latter include Sergio Aragones' *Groo the Wanderer*, Mike Baron and Steve Rude's *Nexus*, Stan Sakai's *Usagi Yojimbo*, Matt Wagner's *Grendel*, Baron's psychotic super-hero *Badger*, and Bob Burden's bizarre parody, *Flaming Carrot Comics*. Such publisher-hopping can be a boon to fans because a series which otherwise might have been canceled can experience new life with another company.

Dark Horse claims it has published, over its brief tenure, more creator-owned titles than any publisher in the medium's history. Dark Horse also serves as a vehicle for talented newcomers, through its *Dark Horse Presents* anthology, its extensive line of mini-series, and by publishing an occasional one-shot for popular self-publishers. An example of the latter is a 1998 trade paperback collection entitled *Too Much Coffeeman's Guide to the Perplexed*. This wildly funny compilation reprints some of the early comic strips and mini-comics of Shannon Wheeler, who self-publishes his *Too Much Coffeeman* under the Adhesive Comics imprint. Not only does the Dark Horse compilation give Wheeler's surreal comic a wider distribution, but it reprints early work, which the writer/artist would probably not have reissued on his own.

Creator-owned comics present publishers with a downside, however, since dissatisfied writers and artists can move their titles to another publisher when contracts expire. Although Dark Horse has gained more than it has lost in this arena, a few creators have pulled up stakes from the Dark Horse camp. The most prominent example is *Nexus*, a wonderfully original science-fiction/adult super-hero title created in 1981 by Mike Baron and Steve Rude. It tells the complex and fully-realized story of Horatio Hellpop, who is granted nearly omnipotent powers by a mysterious being, but is then compelled by dreams to use those powers to execute the galaxy's most notorious dictators, mass-murderers, and serial killers. Baron is a subtle, inventive writer, and Rude is an exciting, highly skilled illustrator; together they constitute one of the most respected creative teams in the industry. *Nexus* was first issued by Capital Comics, the short-lived publishing venture of one of the industry's leading distribution companies. When Capital folded in the mid-1980s, *Nexus* was picked up by another independent publisher, First Comics, where it enjoyed a lengthy run. First Comics died in 1991, leaving *Nexus* without a home once more. Dark Horse picked up the title in 1992 and continued to publish it fairly regularly, releasing eighteen ongoing issues and several mini-series.[6] When the most recent Dark Horse contract expired, Baron and Rude decided to part company. As of this writing, *Nexus* has not found a new publisher, though industry rumors abound. The final Dark Horse issue appeared in 1997.

Readers should also note that Dark Horse differs from rival publishers in one other respect. Most comics companies focus on producing either the traditional color comics, or they restrict themselves to black & white comics exclusively. Dark Horse publishes both types of books in equal measure. For reviewing purposes in this article, titles should be construed as full-

color books unless they are specifically identified as black & white.

The Virtue of Limited Series

One more characteristic which distinguishes Dark Horse from the competition is the publisher's heavy reliance on limited series, most typically two- to four-issue mini-series. Few Dark Horse titles utilize continuous numbering in an ongoing serial. Rare examples include *Ghost*, *Madman*, and *Usagi Yojimbo*. Even the most popular recurring Dark Horse books tend to be published as a continuous cycle of limited series. Dark Horse has issued leading titles such as *Aliens*, *Predator*, *Star Wars*, *Concrete*, *Hellboy*, and *The Mask* in this manner for years. The limited series method of production offers a variety of advantages for the publisher, the reader, and even the librarian.

The principal advantage of limited series to Dark Horse is that the publisher eliminates the risk of supporting a marginal series experiencing declining sales. If a particular title begins to sell poorly over a period of time, Dark Horse can suspend publication for as long as it wishes without appearing to have pulled the plug on a losing product. Similarly, the publisher can resume production at any time without the complexity of a major relaunch. In the case of licensed properties, limited series allow Dark Horse to employ a variety of artists and writers. Although a popular comic creator might be reluctant to agree to the rigors of a monthly series, he or she is more likely to sign on for a two- or four-issue stint. Avoiding the oppressive grind of monthly deadlines inherent in an ongoing series is another advantage. If a few months intervene between one project and the next, readers (and the retailers) won't view it as a breakdown in the production process. Finally, the finite story arcs of limited series are custom made for trade paperback reprint compilations. Other publishers, recognizing these advantages, have begun to utilize the technique, though sparingly, in recent years. Examples include Marvel's latest *Conan* series, Topps Comics' *Xena: Warrior Princess* adaptations, and Awesome Entertainment's *Fighting American*.

Fans also benefit from continuous cycles of limited series. New readers can jump on at any time without needing to collect extensive back issues to fill in the story. More importantly, they can decide to purchase a particular story arc even if they're not interested in future issues. This occurs commonly when a certain storyline receives advance buzz in the fan press, when an individual story features a guest star that the reader likes, or when a limited series is done by an artist or writer the reader enjoys.

The major advantage of limited series for libraries is the propensity to reprint them as trade paperbacks. This is especially noteworthy where Dark Horse is concerned, because the publisher strives to keep as many of its paperbacks in print as it possibly can.

In addition to its ongoing cycles of mini-series, Dark Horse has also published an extensive array of traditional limited series of varying lengths (i.e., those with no planned sequels). Many of these have generated profuse praise from fans, as well as winning prestigious industry awards. For this reason, a few examples are worth mentioning at this point.

Elric Stormbringer (seven issues, 1997) is an amazing adaptation of the acclaimed Michael Moorcock sword-and-sorcery novel. The series, also available as a trade paperback, was written and drawn by long-time Moorcock fan P. Craig Russell. Although Russell had adapted other Elric stories for various comics publishers in the past, *Stormbringer* is one of his finest works. He captures the ethereal quality of Moorcock's haunted hero perfectly, and his pacing and dialogue are dead-on. Russell's distinctive, evocative art on this project won him the 1998 Eisner award for best penciler/inker. The series was originally contracted by Topps Comics, but was published jointly by Topps and Dark Horse. The trade paperback also includes an additional story written by industry legend Neil Gaiman, with art by Russell. The latter piece, called "One Life: Furnished in Early Moorcock," was originally published by Topps as a 1996 one-shot. It is a touching, semi-autobiographical piece about a British schoolboy's discovery of fantasy fiction in general, and Moorcock's Elric novels in particular.

Another finite miniseries is Frank Miller's spectacular *300* (five issues, 1998). In this series, Miller retells the famous story of the Spartans' ill-fated stand at Thermopolae during the Persian War of 480 BC. Miller admits to being captivated by the heroism of the 300 Spartan warriors from boyhood on. Writer/artist Miller has researched his topic extensively, and *300* offers a fascinating look at the history and culture of ancient Greece. Although the story builds slowly at first, by the third issue the action becomes intense. Miller, best known for his work on *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Sin City*, is a master of lean, compelling prose and bold, cinematic artwork. Unlike much of Miller's recent work, *300* is not a black & white title, but utilizes highly effective coloring by skilled collaborator Lynn Varney. The series has only recently been completed,

but Dark Horse has already announced that it will reprint the remarkable story in a special hardcover compilation.

DARK HORSE PRESENTS (MONTHLY, B&W, 1986—)

In the first issues of *Dark Horse Presents* (July, 1986), editor Randy Stradley identified the new comic's intended mission: to create "an atmosphere where an artist, or a group of artists, can feel free to experiment; to push at their own boundaries—and at the boundaries of the comics medium." The fact that *DHP* has won numerous Eisner awards over the years for "best comic book anthology" is proof that Stradley was on to something.

This monthly anthology series has been the proving ground for many of Dark Horse Comics's most popular series, including *Concrete* and *Sin City*. New takes on the science fiction, horror, noir detective, humor, and light adventure genres can be found in various combinations in a typical issue, usually with strong leaning towards adult situations. The writing and art is handled by some of the best folk in the second tier of comics creators—those who are almost, but not quite, household names to comics fans, or those who self-publish their own series and want to try their hand at something different without the risk associated with putting out another comic on their own. Along the way, *Dark Horse Presents* has also published works by some of the industry's most respected and popular names, including Frank Miller and Matt Wagner.

Mainstream comics fans usually do not gravitate toward anthology comics, but *Dark Horse Presents* has established a reputation as a vehicle for high quality stories of all types. To give potential new readers a feel for the title, and to reprint some of Dark Horse's most memorable stories, the publisher has issued a series of trade paperback compilations entitled *The Best of Dark Horse Presents*.

ALIENS (CONTINUING CYCLE OF MINI-SERIES, 1988—)

The terrifying creatures that incubate in humans and have acid for blood were introduced in Ridley Scott's 1979 movie "Alien," a film that spawned three sequels. The *Aliens* comic book is actually a continuous stream of mini-series and special issues, instead of a true ongoing serial, but like many of Dark Horse's movie tie-ins, there is an *Aliens* comic book of one sort or another shipping nearly every month. With the exception of the alien creatures themselves, the characters and settings in most of the comics have little or nothing to do with those seen in the movies. The creatures appear in all sorts of outer space environments, as well as on Earth through various periods in history. For example, a recent one-shot by writer/artist David Wenzel, entitled *Aliens: Stalker* (1998), has ancient Vikings battling the creature. The typical *Aliens* recipe relies on a large dollop of suspense and a roiling mixture of violence, gunplay, explosions, and gore. Plots run the gamut from straight adaptations of the movies to the tale of a pig with a low-yield thermonuclear bomb and a proximity trigger strapped to its back and released on a planet infested with the aliens. To date, several dozen *Aliens* mini-series and one-shots have been released, many of which are available as trade paperback compilations. The creatures have also appeared in numerous *Dark Horse Presents* stories.

Dark Horse has also experienced considerable success with a series of six or more team-ups (violent confrontations, actually) involving the Aliens and Predator characters. The Aliens have also appeared in crossovers with characters from other comics publishers, including Superman (DC), Batman (DC), and most recently, the WildC.A.T.s (Image).

PREDATOR (CONTINUING CYCLE OF MINI-SERIES, 1989—)

Stars of two movies, the alien Predators are a race of hunters that thrill in the hunt and are attracted to areas of high stress and violence. Targets that present a challenge are favored the most, and this is one reason Predators frequently visit. The nearly monthly mini-series and one-shot issues have featured the Predators chasing after normal humans, various super-heroes, the creatures from the "Aliens" movies, and other Predators. The level of violence in this quasi-series is quite high, so it is not the sort of book one would give to a younger child; however, many pre-teens, teenagers, and adults enjoy this variation on the classic story "The Most Dangerous Game."

Over the years, the Dark Horse series has developed an elaborate fictional culture for the Predators, and they are often depicted in a sympathetic light. Where Ridley Scott's Aliens are cunning, but nearly mindless, killing machines, the Predators are an honorable race, after a fashion. As with the *Aliens* comics, the *Predator* titles often feature the characters during a different period of Earth's history—usually one involving bloodshed and

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warfare. A recent episode, entitled *Predator: Hell Come a Walkin,*" featured a Predator hunting soldiers during the American Civil War.

Another similarity with the *Aliens* series is the frequency of crossovers with other comic book characters, including DC's Batman (no fewer than three times), Fleetway's Judge Dredd, Acclaim's Magnus Robot Fighter, and Dark Horse's Tarzan.

Star Wars (Ongoing Cycle of Miniseries, 1991—)

"A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away..." With those words, George Lucas created a phenomenon that has lasted for over twenty years. During that time, the Star Wars characters have appeared in three movies, several video games, dozens of novels, a long-running newspaper strip, hundreds of toys, and also nearly twenty years' worth of comic books. Now, with a new Star Wars movie in the offing, interest in the science fiction saga remains as intense as ever.

There has not been an ongoing *Star Wars* comic series since the Marvel title ended in 1986, but hardly a month goes by without at least one, and usually two or more, issues of a *Star Wars* mini-series from Dark Horse. The first Dark Horse effort, a six-part story entitled *Star Wars: Dark Empire*, premiered in late 1991, and the franchise has been going strong ever since. Dark Horse also reprints virtually every one of the mini-series in trade paperback format, with nearly three dozen titles currently in print. Previous stories include comic book adaptations of all three movies and several of the novels, stories that bridge the gaps between the movies, the past history of R2-D2 and C-3PO, the rise of the Lords of the Sith (whose most famous adherent was Darth Vader), and the previous adventures of the bounty hunter known as Boba Fett, among other tales. One of the most popular subjects is the "X-Wing Rogue Squadron," which chronicles the exploits of a cocky band of fighter pilots and is set at the time of the original movies. Dark Horse has also reprinted the outstanding "Star Wars" newspaper strip, written by the late Archie Goodwin and drawn by comic book veteran Al Williamson. The strip has been compiled in a series of five trade paperbacks, under the series title *Classic Star Wars*.

The Star Wars license is one of the pillars of Dark Horse Comics; almost every issue of every series ranks in the top 100 comics sold each month, consistently selling around 50,000 copies of each issue.

With the frequent exception of gorgeous painted covers, the artwork on most of the Star Wars miniseries has been workmanlike, but unexceptional. A few of the series have been drawn by major names in the industry, including Howard Chaykin, Chris Sprouse, and Terry Dodson, but most have not. In contrast, the writing is usually strong and sometimes outstanding. Dark Horse often hires leading comics writers to handle the chore, including such luminaries as Mike Baron, Louise Simonson, and Roy Thomas. The publisher has also employed prolific Star Wars novelists such as Timothy Zahn and Michael Stackpole.

Edgar Rice Burroughs' Tarzan (Monthly, 1996-1998)

Raised by apes, Tarzan, the lord of the jungle, is now the sworn protector of the deep jungles and all the creatures therein. Along with Superman and Sherlock Holmes, Tarzan is one of the most recognizable characters in modern fiction. Like Superman and Holmes, the Tarzan character has spawned a legion of imitators, but none has come close to matching the popularity and majesty of the original. Tarzan, who first appeared in *All-Story* magazine in 1912, was the creation of Edgar Rice Burroughs, a failed businessman turned author. The character was an instant, phenomenal success and Burroughs had a career at last. He continued writing until his death in 1950, producing more than twenty Tarzan novels and several dozen short stories. Burroughs also created several other popular fantasy/adventure series, including John Carter of Mars, Carson Napier of Venus, and the Pellucidar tales which chronicled a hidden world at the "Earth's core."[7]

The indomitable Lord of the Apes is best known from the dozens of Tarzan movies made over the years, especially the long-running series starring Olympic athlete Johnny Weissmuller. The character has also been adapted for radio, several TV shows, a Saturday morning cartoon, and a classic newspaper comic strip which premiered in 1929 and ran for more than five decades. The strip has been pencilled by a variety of comics industry legends over the years, including Hal Foster, Burne Hogarth, and Russ Manning.[8]

Tarzan has also enjoyed a long and illustrious career in comic books. Beginning in 1939, Tarzan comics were published continuously for forty years, first by Dell, then by Gold Key, DC, and Marvel. Here again, the comics were often drawn by industry greats such as Foster, Manning, and Joe Kubert. Except for a variety of brief projects by small publishers, the character all

but disappeared from comic books in the 1980s. Dark Horse then acquired the license in 1995. Consistent with past practice, the publisher tested the waters with several mini-series, beginning with *Tarzan: The Lost Adventure*, a four-issue adaptation of an unpublished Burroughs manuscript.[9] Dark Horse quickly followed with two team-up stories. *Tarzan/John Carter: Warlord of Mars* (1996) paired Burroughs' two greatest heroes in a Barsoomian adventure. *Tarzan versus Predator at the Earth's Core* teamed Tarzan and David Innes (Burroughs' Pellucidar hero) against another Dark Horse licensed property, the alien Predators. The latter mini-series, produced by comics veterans Walter Simonson and Lee Weeks, was a surprisingly satisfying story. Following the various limited series, Dark Horse launched an ongoing monthly *Tarzan* title in mid-1996.

The hallmark of the Dark Horse run on *Tarzan* has been the publisher's fidelity to Burroughs' vision of the noble jungle lord. The various artists and writers who have worked on the books are avowed Burroughs fans, which is evident in virtually every issue. Memorable Burroughs characters from the steadfast Belgian explorer, Paul D'Arnot, to the giant golden lion, Jad-Bal-Ja, make regular appearances. Most of the Dark Horse stories are new, but many embellish plots and settings from Burroughs' works, including Pellucidar and the fabled city of Opar.

Tarzan himself is depicted as accurately as he has ever been. All of the Dark Horse artists portray him in the classic mode: tall, graceful, lithe and powerful. The various writers, including Thomas Yeates, Bruce Jones, Darko Macan, and Lovern Kindzierski, strive to capture the essence that makes Tarzan unique: savage, yet educated to the courtesies of civilization; merciless to his deserving enemies, yet oddly compassionate toward the misguided would-be villain; supremely confident in his abilities; quick to take action; and above all, unswervingly loyal to his wife, Jane Porter.

As in Burroughs' novels, the Dark Horse adventures stretch from the turn of the century to the 1940s, though the stories are not told in chronological fashion. In one issue, Tarzan battles mind-controlled Nazis in the jungles of Africa; in the next he tackles the Phantom of the Opera in 1909 Paris. The writers also have fun with the historical settings, using the opportunity for Tarzan to meet such luminaries as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Thomas Edison, and Nikola Tesla.

Although the ongoing series received strong accolades from Edgar Rice Burroughs fans, the quality of the stories was somewhat uneven. More importantly, the title never sold well, perhaps because it was too old-fashioned for younger readers. In 1998, after producing twenty issues, Dark Horse pulled the plug on the monthly title. However, the publisher continues to release the occasional limited series, including an adaptation of the 1915 novel, *The Return of Tarzan* (1997) and another team-up, *Tarzan/Carson of Venus* (1998). According to a Dark Horse spokesperson, the publisher now plans to focus more on adaptations of Tarzan novels and on Burroughs' non-Tarzan creations.

The monthly series is no more, but Dark Horse has gathered most of its Tarzan stories into hardcover and paperback collections. Overall, the title is great fun, and is particularly recommended to hard-core Tarzan fans.

MADMAN (IRREGULAR, 1994—)

Madman is not exactly a parody of super-heroes, but it is one of the goofiest examples of the super-hero genre on today's market. Madman is the creation of writer/artist Mike Allred, considered by many to be one of the most original people working in modern comics. The book's unique main character is an amnesiac survivor of a horrible automobile crash. In fact, he was killed in the crash, but was somehow brought back to life by a brilliant scientist, Dr. Boiffard. The poor wretch now resembles a patchwork Frankenstein's monster, with bluish skin, huge, horrible scars covering his body, and a mysterious, jagged fissure in the center of his forehead. Boiffard names his creation Frank Einstein, after the professor's biggest idols—Frank Sinatra and Albert Einstein. Of course the name is also on pun on "Frankenstein."

Frank has no recollection of his prior life. Furthermore, he is now possessed of a childlike innocence and enthusiasm, combined with an adult's intellect and understanding. Because of his horrible appearance, Frank suffers from "self-esteem issues." As a security blanket, he creates a costume based on his favorite comic book hero, "Mr. Excitement." The costume consists of a slightly baggy, white body-suit, a white mask, gloves, and black combat boots. Emblazoned on his chest is Mr. Excitement's trademark red lightning bolt/exclamation mark. In his first adventure, our hero gains a nom de guerre of his own when he is shot out of a cannon at a circus, and the spectators dub him "The Madman of Snap City."

Madman isn't cowardly, but he is definitely prudent. Unlike most super-heroes, Madman usually has no idea what to do when confronted with a crisis. He is just as apt to run away from danger as to jump into the fray. In

most instances, he experiences the same feelings of confusion, disbelief, and fear that any normal person would when confronted with unexplained danger. To his credit, Madman perseveres and somehow deals with the problem at hand. He does possess super powers, but they are fairly low-level abilities—enhanced agility and reflexes. He also has a small antenna hidden in the crevice of his forehead, which provides him with ill-defined psychic awareness that he doesn't fully understand.

The oddity of *Madman* has a decidedly "Alice in Wonderland" quality to it, and the stories are filled with a bizarre mixture of aliens, robots, secret agents, circus freaks, mad scientists, and mutant beatnik poets. In one episode, Frank aides a "confirmed bachelor" alien who is fleeing a Sadie Hawkins Day event where the women eat their mates. In another, he helps a man who is turned into a monstrous mass of living vomit. Not all *Madman* stories are played for laughs, however; several have packed a surprising dramatic wallop.

Another defining feature of *Madman* is the main character's touching sensitivity and introspection. He records his thoughts in a daily diary, for example, and his philosophic observations reflect his child-like view of the world. An especially strong element of the book is the abiding love shared by Frank and his freckle-faced girlfriend, Josephine Lombard. Allred portrays the relationship between Frank and Jo in a moving, powerful, and realistic manner, doubtlessly patterned on his own long-standing marriage. Other supporting characters include Frank's friend and employer Dr. Gillespie Flem (the second-most brilliant scientist on the planet); Mott, the bachelor alien from the planet Hoople; intrepid Chinese-American secret agent Chow Skip Wang; and Astroman, a robot who has been implanted with Madman's personality.

Allred's energetic artistic style is perfect for conveying action and excitement and is enhanced by the vivid coloring done by Allred's wife Laura. Allred's imagery is often unusual and memorable. For example, in a story where Madman is shrunk to the size of an ant, he is shown clinging to the face of his now-giant antagonist, using the man's peg-sized beard stubble for handholds.

Allred is also a self-confessed pop-culture fan, and *Madman* is filled with wordplay and visual humor. Characters are drawn to look like Clint Eastwood, Japanese cartoon character Astroboy, or professor Zharkov from the "Flash Gordon" movie serials. Situations mimic famous scenes in movies, such as the bomb-riding sequence from "Dr. Strangelove." Characters' names often involve TV and music references, such as Dr. Gillespie and Mott the Hoople.

Madman first appeared as two three-issue limited series released by Tundra Publishing in 1992 and 1993. (Tundra, founded by *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* co-creator Kevin Eastman, was a short-lived company designed to offer opportunities to promising young comics artists.) In 1994, Dark Horse picked up *Madman* as an ongoing series, as part of its Legends imprint. After eleven issues, Allred stopped work on *Madman* in order to produce another Dark Horse project, a seven-issue limited series called *Red Rocket 7*. That task was recently completed, and Dark Horse has announced that issue no. 12 of *Madman* will appear later this year. The first ten issues of the ongoing series are now available in paperback form from Dark Horse. Kitchen Sink Press has reprinted the original two Tundra series in trade paperback format as well. Dark Horse has also published several *Madman* mini-series, in which the quirky hero teams up with other comic book heroes: DC's Superman; Dark Horse's The Jam; and Nexus, also from Dark Horse.

CONCRETE (IRREGULAR CYCLE OF MINI-SERIES; 1987—)

Writer/artist Paul Chadwick was employed as a Hollywood storyboard artist in 1983 when he attempted to sell his idea for *Concrete* to the comic book industry. The concept was not fully developed and no one offered him a contract. In 1985, he was hired by Marvel to help revive *The Dazzler*, a decidedly lesser title which was soon canceled anyway. At the same time, Chadwick continued to peddle his *Concrete* proposal.[10] Randy Stradley, editor for the fledgling Dark Horse Comics, suggested that instead of working on a full-blown *Concrete* series, Chadwick should try a short story for a new Dark Horse anthology series. The writer/artist was reluctant to do so, but took a chance, and the first Concrete story appeared in *Dark Horse Presents* no. 1 (July, 1986). Reviews in the fan press were overwhelmingly positive, and *DHP* continued to publish Chadwick's Concrete stories.[11] The character received an unexpected boost when legendary, opinionated science-fiction writer (and life-long comics fan) Harlan Ellison heaped lavish praise on Chadwick's stories in a highly visible 1988 *Playboy* magazine article.[12] At this point, a number of comics publishers were bidding to publish an ongoing *Concrete* series, but Chadwick opted to stay with Dark Horse because the company offered him complete

artistic freedom. The bimonthly black & white series, which ran for ten issues in 1987/1988, was an important contributor to Dark Horse's early success. It also won the 1988 Eisner and Harvey awards for best new series, and the 1988 and 1989 Eisners for best continuing series. Since that time, Chadwick has continued to produce outstanding Concrete stories for Dark Horse, but as a continuing cycle of four-color mini-series and one-shots, as well as occasional short stories for *Dark Horse Presents*. His work has won more than a dozen major industry awards. In addition to those already mentioned, Chadwick won a 1991 Eisner for best single issue (*Concrete Celebrates Earth Day*) and a 1992 Eisner for best limited series (*Concrete: Fragile Creature*). *Concrete* is widely recognized by fans, critics, and professionals as an example of the very best that comic books can offer.

On the surface, *Concrete*'s storyline sounds trite, simplistic, and, well... comic-bookish. Political speechwriter Ronald Lithgow is abducted by aliens and his brain is transplanted into the body of a massive, (seven foot tall, 1,200-pound) humanoid creature with a round, featureless head and grey, rock-like skin. On the up-side, Lithgow's new body is strong and resistent to damage. Concrete can jump extremely long distances, hold his breath for more than an hour, regenerate himself after suffering massive injuries, and his body never tires. The most remarkable gift is Concrete's superhuman eyesight, which can distinguish the stars in the heavens or the shape of a snowflake with equal clarity. On the downside, Lithgow has completely lost his senses of touch, taste, and smell, as well as his ability to function sexually or otherwise live a normal life. He is a human being stuck in the body of a walking concrete statue.

The idea of a man trapped in a monster's body, complete with themes of alienation and loss, is not new to comic books. More than thirty-five years ago, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby explored the notion, sometimes brilliantly, in the ongoing pages of Marvel's *Fantastic Four*. Since then, the man-monster topic has become commonplace in the comics literature. However, *Concrete* is unique and interesting because of what Chadwick has done with his character. Instead of becoming a super-hero, reluctant or otherwise, Concrete tries to continue his life as normally as possible under the bizarre circumstances. Although some Concrete stories portray a comic book-style adventure, in most, very little action takes place. *Concrete* is best described as a story of introspection, observation, conversation, and interpersonal relations. In that sense, it has a great deal in common with the philosophical ruminations of *Madman*, another Dark Horse title. But, where *Madman* is madcap, impulsive, and frantic, *Concrete* is serious, reflective, and sedate. Lithgow's ponderous physical form is a metaphor for the character's calm, reasoned, slow-moving journey of self discovery.

A major theme of *Concrete* is the nature and consequences of celebrity in modern America. With Lithgow's cooperation, the government spins the tale that Concrete is a cyborg—a half human, half machine product of a military experiment. Based on this highly effective PR effort, Concrete becomes an instant celebrity. Instead of being feared, he is adored and sought-after. In his first appearance (*Dark Horse Presents* 1), Concrete is duped into being the entertainment at a little girl's birthday party, an experience he enjoys, for the most part. When he learns that the girl's mother makes a hobby of tricking celebrities in this way, the usually gentle Concrete quietly leaves her an unmistakable message by placing the woman's car on the roof of her garage.

Concrete strives to live a normal life despite his appearance and the constraints of celebrity. He resumes his writing career, selling essays and opinion pieces to major magazines, as well as writing travel books. He also takes the occasional odd-job as a Hollywood stunt technician or a rock star's bodyguard. In these ways, he supports his two former hobbies, world travel and mountaineering.

Chadwick excels at providing the telling details which make Concrete's life believable. For example, he watches TV while sitting in a chair constructed of cement blocks, and he showers (when the need arises) by visiting a nearby automatic car wash. To sublimate his own lack of a sex life, Concrete collects fine erotic art, including classical paintings.

Chadwick accurately portrays his character's bouts with sadness and longing without going overboard. In one episode, Concrete is eavesdropping on two couples having dinner. To his embarrassed disappointment, he finds himself becoming inexorably more envious of one of the men, who seems to have everything—a beautiful wife, a lovely home, unerring luck with investments, and all the trappings of success. It is only when the couples move away from the table that he notices that the object of his envy sits in a wheelchair, paralyzed from the waist down. In another story, a young actress kisses Concrete out of curiosity. When she asks whether he can feel her kiss, Concrete responds, "No. I cannot. However, I can vividly appreciate the concept." Scenes such as these are never por-

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trayed in a heavy-handed manner, and they generally serve as brief counterpoint to Concrete's more common cheerfulness and matter-of-fact outlook.

Concrete derives a great deal of support from the kindness and company of his two closest friends. Larry Munro, a mild-mannered would-be novelist, is employed by Concrete as his assistant and secretary. Maureen Vonnegut is a biologist hired by the government to study Concrete. Lithgow develops a strong bond with the two and sometimes feels directionless when they are not part of his daily life.

Because of Concrete's sensual limitations, the book often explores the life of the mind. Many of the stories involve little more than the main character pondering some aspect of humanity. Concrete also possesses a vivid, sometimes overactive imagination, which offers interesting fodder for wry humor, poetic imagery, or subtle commentary. In one story, while strolling at the bottom of Puget Sound, Concrete imagines that mermaids are real, and that generations of sailors and fishermen have conspired to keep this wonderful secret to themselves. In another, Concrete is taking a nighttime walk in the California desert when he encounters a mysterious-looking compound surrounded by a tall fence. Immediately, he begins to imagine a government-controlled UFO conspiracy. As he approaches the compound, his speculations become wilder and more hopeful; perhaps the facility holds the secret to his own involuntary transformation. When, at last, he peers into the window of the suspicious building, he discovers it is merely a large truck depot. Chadwick imbues such minor episodes with honesty and humanity, making otherwise insignificant observations poignant and memorable.

Another recurring theme in *Concrete* is nature and the environment. Concrete himself is a concerned environmentalist and the backdrop of his daily life typically involves such activities as recycling and use of solar power. *Think Like a Mountain* (1996), one of Chadwick's most complex and thought-provoking stories, addresses the topic head on. The six-part limited series depicts Concrete's reluctant, but ever-increasing involvement with a group of militant environmentalists seeking to save a primeval forest from clear-cut logging. Chadwick does an excellent job presenting both sides of this difficult issue while telling a riveting story at the same time. The series explores the ideas of commitment, sacrifice, and the consequences of difficult decisions.

Concrete is unlike any comic being published today and is highly recommended for every library collection. Chadwick is a highly skilled writer and artist, as well as a superb storyteller and keen observer of human behavior. The writer/artist is taking a brief hiatus to work on a new science-fiction adventure title for Dark Horse and a fantasy/fable for DC-Vertigo, but the next Concrete mini-series is scheduled for late 1999. Nearly all of *Concrete*'s previous episodes are available in trade paperback form, including the ten-issue black & white series, all of the mini-series, and two volumes of short stories from *Dark Horse Presents*.

HELLBOY (IRREGULAR, NO ONGOING SERIES, 1994—)

One of Dark Horse's most popular (and unusual) characters is the awarding-winning Hellboy, created by writer/artist Mike Mignola. Mignola began working as an artist for DC and Marvel in the mid-1980s, where he handled standard super-hero fare such as *Alpha Flight*. Mignola caught the attention of fandom for his work on a 1989 mini-series, *Batman: Gotham by Gaslight* (DC). His distinctive, gothic style was best suited to supernatural tales, such as *The Phantom Stranger* (DC, 1987) and *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (Topps, 1992). When Dark Horse sought to establish its Legends imprint for creator-owned comics, Mignola was one of the first artists they contacted.

The Hellboy character made his debut in a 1994 five-issue mini-series entitled *Hellboy: Seed of Destruction*. In 1944 England, a team of British and American parapsychologists are hunting Nazi agents who are seeking to call up demonic forces as a weapon of war. The investigators track the agents to a church in East Bromwich, where they foil the Nazis' plans, but not before a mysterious young creature materializes from an unknown dimension. The creature, dubbed Hellboy, resembles an archetypical devil, with bright red skin, hooves, a tail, and two prominent horns. The investigators take the young Hellboy to America, where he is raised and tutored by Professor Trevor Bruttenholm of the Bureau for Paranormal Research and Defense (BPRD). Hellboy is trained in the supernatural, and in 1952 he becomes the BPRD's primary field agent. In recognition of his services, the United Nations grants him "honorary human status." Along the way, Hellboy has his horns removed in order to appear less demonic, but the stumps on his forehead remain an obvious reminder. Despite his frightening appearance, in time Hellboy becomes

widely admired as "the world's greatest paranormal investigator."

The hulking, jut-jawed Hellboy possesses few abnormal abilities except that he is stronger than a normal man, a bit more impervious to pain and injury, and most notably, possesses a right hand made of an unknown, nearly indestructible metal which appears to have ill-defined mystical properties. Although Hellboy is now over fifty years old, he seems as nimble and energetic as ever. The details of Hellboy's origin and nature remain unknown, but hints have been dropped that he is the result of a union between the Devil and a human mistress. One of Hellboy's most intriguing characteristics is his steadfast refusal to investigate his own background. He is a tough brawler and a loyal, compassionate friend. He takes his unusual appearance and occupation with matter-of-fact humor and he is completely unflappable in the face of the most horrific situations. The supporting cast focuses on other BPRD investigators, including NYU professor Kate Corrigan, and Abe Sapien, the green-skinned, water-breathing humanoid.

Hellboy has developed a strong fan following due to Mignola's dramatic, moody drawing style, as well as his powerful storytelling, low-key humor, and crisp dialogue. Many Hellboy stories incorporate elements of little-known folktales, legends, and horror tales. The hero's adversaries range from demons, ghosts, and werewolves, to leprechauns and homunculi. Common themes involve Catholic demonology and Gaelic folklore. Some stories are chilling and suspenseful, some violent, and others cheerfully bizarre. One of the series' most lovably peculiar aspects is that, despite Hellboy's skills as a sleuth and paranormal expert, his investigations invariably end with a fist-fight between hero and foe.

Mignola has won quite a few prestigious industry awards for his work on *Hellboy*, including a 1994 Harvey for best artist, a 1996 International Horror Guild Award, and no fewer than three Eisners for best writer/artist. Hellboy does not appear as an ongoing title, but rather as a succession of intermittent limited series and one-shots, and as short stories in the *Dark Horse Presents* anthology series. Most of the Hellboy stories have been reprinted as trade paperback compilations. Hellboy has also made guest appearances and team-ups with other comics characters, such as Dark Horse's *Ghost*, Image's *Savage Dragon*, and DC's *Batman*.

SIN CITY (IRREGULAR CYCLE OF MINI-SERIES, B&W, 1993—)

Next to the *Aliens* franchise, Frank Miller's *Sin City* is Dark Horse Comics' most successful series. In *Sin City*, Miller has taken the standard elements of hard-boiled crime fiction and exaggerated them to grotesque proportions. The stories take place in a fictional urban jungle nicknamed "Sin City," where criminals thrive, prostitution is a tourist industry, and everyone in power is corrupt. Miller's protagonists are large, brutish men, miserable loners who buck the system with a dogged sense of honor but little hope of success or redemption. Women are typically vamps or hookers, who either stand by their man with uncommon strength or betray him with casual ruthlessness. The hallmark of any *Sin City* story is chilling, deadly violence on a massive scale.

Miller writes in a terse, muscular style befitting his topic, but *Sin City's* real claim to greatness lies in Miller's intense, innovative artwork. The books are done in black & white, with an extraordinary emphasis on the black. The characters are often drawn in silhouette, and when they are not, the entire background is black. Like his writing, Miller's dark, shadowy drawing style and dramatic composition is perfectly suited to the subject. Each panel is beautifully and simply arranged to emphasize either explosive action or raw emotion. *Sin City* has garnered widespread critical acclaim, as well as several industry awards, but the book is not suited to everyone's taste, nor is it appropriate for young readers.

According to various Frank Miller interviews, the writer/artist's first love is crime stories. His dream was to create crime comics, but no one was publishing such fare in the 1970s, so he worked on super-hero books instead.[13] Miller exploded on the comics scene in 1979, when he began drawing (and subsequently writing) Marvel's *Daredevil*. He redefined the character, giving him a harder edge and a more detailed martial arts back-story. In 1982, Miller continued his martial arts theme with another title for Marvel, the *Wolverine* mini-series (coplotted and scripted by Chris Claremont). In 1982, he did a full-blown martial arts mini-series, entitled *Ronin*, for DC. Miller's status as an industry superstar was cemented by his bleak, alternate-future tale *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (DC, 1986), which single-handedly returned Batman to his grim vigilante roots. Now regarded as a comic book classic, *The Dark Knight Returns* set the entire super-hero genre on its ear for years to come.

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Miller left the comic book field completely for several years, before being lured back by the Dark Horse promise of creative control. His first work for Dark Horse was a dystopian, futuristic military tale entitled *Give Me Liberty* (1990). The story, drawn by the great Dave Gibbons, featured the first appearance of a heroic, black female soldier named Martha Washington. (Miller and Gibbons have subsequently produced several other "Martha Washington" mini-series for Dark Horse.) Next, Miller did another bleak, near-future title called *Hard Boiled*. Miller's third Dark Horse project was his first Sin City story, which began in 1991 in the pages of *Dark Horse Presents*.

The original *Sin City* mini-series was reissued as a paperback compilation in 1993 and a hardcover edition in 1994. Both versions have undergone numerous printings since then. Miller has produced four additional *Sin City* mini-series, all of which are now available in paperback form. Dark Horse has also published a handful of *Sin City* one-shots written and drawn by Miller.

GHOST (SECOND SERIES; MONTHLY, 1998—)

It's not every protagonist who finds herself murdered before her very first comic book appearance. When Elisa Cameron wakes up to find that she has become a ghost, she has no memory of who she was or why she was killed. She also has no idea why she is trapped in a mysterious ethereal state. As the vigilante Ghost, Elisa searches for the answers about her past and seeks to punish the people responsible for her death.

Along the way, Ghost learns about her new powers and limitations. Ghost's normal state is invisible and incorporeal, but if she concentrates, she can make her body (or parts of it) solid for brief periods. She can "ghost" other people and objects, making them temporarily intangible by touching them. Ghost can fly, as well as teleport from one place to another. The act of teleporting forces her to travel briefly through an alternate dimension populated by the demons of her own personal hell, a horrifying experience she tries to avoid at all costs. Like Superman, she is vulnerable to one substance only, in this case jade. Like a human, Ghost needs rest, but she quickly learns that when she falls asleep, her body resumes its intangible form and she begins to sink deep into the earth. To avoid this unpleasantness, she constructs a bed made of solid jade and places it in a cemetery mausoleum, where she finds peace and privacy when needed.

Gradually, Ghost's investigations reveal that her former name was Elisa Cameron, and that she was a reporter for *The Daily Arcadian*. Her home city of Arcadia is thoroughly corrupt, controlled by mobsters, powerful industrialists, and their political pawns. Elisa learns that the ruling elite ordered her killed when her investigative reporting threatened to reveal their secrets. With each passing issue, Ghost learns more about the circumstances surrounding her death, but every new answer posits additional mysteries. As she battles Arcadia's criminal element, she faces superhuman (and in some cases supernatural) adversaries. She also encounters other recently departed spirits, only to learn that she is the only ghost who possesses her strange combination of powers. Her initial quest for her own killers now becomes a frustrating search for the meaning and purpose of her strange new existence.

Ghost is a prime example of so-called "bad-girl comics"—comic books featuring beautiful, well-endowed, female anti-heroes who wear sexy, revealing costumes and inflict mayhem on the male population.[14] Eliza wears a skin-tight white bodysuit, complete with a plunging bustier top. She consciously adopts this provocative attire in order to put her male opponents off-balance, capitalizing on their most obvious weakness. To accentuate the effect of her frightening supernatural powers, Ghost also wears a long, hooded white cape and a white scarf over her face. The combined picture presents one of the most distinctive and memorable female costumes of any modern comics title, and of course constitutes a great deal of the book's allure to male readers. Dark Horse strives to make *Ghost* more than the standard pin-up comic, but the book is definitely guilty of portraying Elisa in blatantly sexy poses and gratuitous comic-book style nudity.

Despite the obvious cheesecake appeal, the stories in *Ghost* are more ambitious and complex than most others in the "bad-girl" genre. In the early issues, Elisa is shown to feel an overpowering rage towards men, but it is an anger whose cause she doesn't understand. Her rage drives her to commit extreme violence against her male adversaries. Ghost is armed with real guns—two .45 caliber automatics—which she liberally employs to kill anyone who opposes her. She also possesses the ability to reach her intangible hand inside a person's body and solidify it, causing a very messy death for the unfortunate victim. Although such bloodshed is commonplace in bad-girl books, it is clear that something deeper is taking place here. Elisa inflicts pitiless retribution on men who abuse women or take advantage of their power over women, but the book's message is not

a strident, "all men are scum," diatribe. Little by little, Elisa learns to control her rage and violence. Later in the series, she catches one of her male allies ogling her cleavage. After belting the poor guy across the room, she tells him, "You're lucky I turned over a new leaf. A month ago I would have shot you."

In the course of her journey of self-discovery, Eliza learns, among other things, that her sister was a porno actress and both her parents are weak-willed alcoholics (though her father was never an abusive parent or husband). She also learns that the frightening dimension she enters during teleportation is actually a construct of her own mind, containing all of her worst fears and disappointments. Although the source of Eliza's rage and hatred is never clearly spelled out, eventually she becomes less of a merciless, vengeance-seeking punisher, and more of a protector of the weak.

Over its four-year run, the stories in *Ghost* have ranged from mysteries, to crime-fighting action, to supernatural horror. Eliza has also teamed up with two other Dark Horse vigilantes: X and Barb Wire, the motorcycle-riding female bounty hunter. Ghost has also costarred with several other Dark Horse stars in special one-shots and mini-series—most notably Hellboy and pulp fiction's The Shadow.

For the most part, *Ghost* has been far tamer than many other bad-girl books on the market today, but in a few instances, the sexual themes have been disturbingly graphic. The most flagrant example is a four-issue story arc entitled "Painful Music." Here Ghost battles a horde of supernatural incubi: naked, male demons with no facial features save for an elephantine snout which they force down their female victims' throats in order to suck out the women's emotional energy and life force. Not a subtle image.

Ghost has been drawn by a variety of highly capable artists, including Adam Hughes and Ivan Reis, but nearly all of the issues have been plotted and scripted by former Hollywood screenwriter Eric Luke. Luke has worked hard at portraying a sympathetic, three-dimensional (no pun intended) character, and some of his stories have been exceptional. Unfortunately, the writing quality has been uneven over the long haul, with otherwise strong stories marred by overly complicated subplots which sometimes confuse rather than enhance the main events.

The character of Ghost first appeared in a 1993 miniseries entitled *Comics' Greatest World*. Soon after, she received her own one-shot special and following that, an ongoing series beginning in 1995. Due to declining sales, Dark Horse decided to cancel the series in 1998, after thirty-six issues. However, the publisher immediately announced it would relaunch a second series starting in September 1998. The new series is written by long-time Dark Horse editor/writer/artist Chris Warner, who created the popular Barb Wire character and also designed Ghost's original costume. The new series has revived the hard, vigilante edge which made the character a hit in the first place. Dark Horse also promises that the new series will reveal the origin and true nature of Ghost's mysterious abilities.

For readers interested in following Ghost's complicated history, Dark Horse has collected most of her stories in trade paperback format, including the early appearances before the start of the first series.

Usagi Yojimbo (Third Series, 10 Issues per Year, B&W, 1996—)

Feudal Japan and her legends come to life in this series about an anthropomorphic rabbit. Usagi Yojimbo (Japanese for "rabbit bodyguard") is actually Miyamoto Usagi, a 17th Century ronin—a wandering samurai with no master. With his rabbit ears tied into a samurai top-knot, Yusagi follows the bushido code of honor, seeking to protect the innocent and battle injustice. He fights against tyrannical feudal lords, corrupt clans, demonic swordsmen, and more. All of the characters in *Usagi Yojimbo* are anthropomorphic, ranging from cats, dogs, chipmunks, and pandas to bears, tigers, and even rhinos.

Of course there is no samurai rabbit in Japanese legend, but the character is based on a famous human ronin of the early 1600s. This setting was chosen because it marks a period of dislocation and change in Japan following the end of a long civil war among rival Japanese Shoguns. The costumes and settings in *Usagi Yojimbo* are quite detailed and historically accurate, and the stories are frequently based on real events and important legends. One of the book's most interesting features is the accompanying "Story Notes" section which explains how each story fits into Japanese history and legend.

Artist/writer Stan Sakai created the character of Usagi Yojimbo in 1984. Sakai is a third-generation Japanese American who had become interested in his heritage. He reads no Japanese himself, but his parents often assist in translating the historical texts which Sakai uncovers. At first Sakai wanted to chronicle the adventures of a real samurai, but one day found himself sketching the warrior rabbit.[15] The character first appeared in an independent comic called *Albedo*

Anthromorphics but soon moved to the *Critters* series published by Fantagraphics. In 1987, Fantagraphics launched Usagi Yojimbo as a separate ongoing series which ran for thirty-eight issues. In 1993, Sakai moved his character to Mirage Studios, the home of the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. A second *Usagi Ujimbo* series ran there for sixteen issues. Usagi also became a character in the Ninja Turtles animated series, and like all TMNT characters, ended up as a toy action figure as well.

Dark Horse began carrying the current *Usagi Yojimbo* series as a black & white monthly in 1996. At present, all of the older stories are available in trade paperback form: seven early compilations from Fantagraphics, plus later ones from Dark Horse. The series sells very consistently for Dark Horse and it has generated a devoted group of loyal fans. Sakai has also won several Eisners for his work on the book.

Except for the subject matter, *Usagi Yojimbo* is a book for all ages. Parents concerned about exposing their children to violence may want to avoid this title, but few children would find the stories disturbing in any way. For example, young fans of Brian Jacques' "Redwall" novels would be extremely comfortable reading *Usagi Yojimbo*. The topic of Japanese samurai is violent by nature, but Sakai does an excellent job of avoiding overly graphic depictions. Sakai intentionally draws his action sequences in a cartoonish style to downplay the death and mayhem taking place. While it is clear from the action that Usagi is slaying his attackers, no gore or bloodshed is shown, and for the most part, the actual stabbing and hacking is left to the reader's imagination. The anthropomorphic characters also help to distance the reader from potentially horrific events. For these reasons, and because of the fairly basic reading level, fans of all ages are drawn to the book. *Usagi Yojimbo* is recommended for its unusual subject matter, attention to historical detail, compelling stories, fast-paced action, and for Sakai's wonderfully expressive artwork.

American Splendor (Second Series, Irregular, B&W, 1994—)

Without question, the most unusual title in the Dark Horse gallery is Harvey Pekar's autobiographical *American Splendor*, a quirky title which chronicles ordinary life in the form of observational vignettes. Pekar, a self-educated, working-class intellectual and jazz music aficionado, has been employed for more than thirty years as a file clerk for the Veterans Administration hospital in Cleveland, Ohio. During that time, he has moonlighted as a jazz critic for such publications as *Downbeat*, *The Village Voice*, and several daily newspapers. In the early 1960s he met fellow music collector Robert Crumb, who would soon emerge as America's leading underground cartoonist. Crumb introduced Pekar to the world of comic strips and comic books, and by the early seventies, Pekar began to explore the medium as a vehicle for his own writer's voice. In 1976, Pekar self-published his first issue of *American Splendor* and continued to release one issue per year for many years.[16] In 1994 Pekar published his first graphic novel, cowritten with his wife (Joyce Brabner) and illustrated by Frank Stack. Entitled *Our Cancer Year*, the brutally honest and moving book relates the author's experiences with chemotherapy and how it affected his daily life and his relationship with his wife. *Booklist* justifiably called it "the most impressive nonfiction graphic novel since Art Spiegelman's *Maus*."[17] Pekar also gained brief notoriety as a cantankerous, fairly regular guest on "Late Night with David Letterman."

Dark Horse began publishing all new *American Splendor* single-issue specials in 1994, at the rate of one (and sometimes two) issues per year. These one-shots contain fewer stories than Pekar's traditional annual publication and are identified by distinctive titles such as *American Splendor: Odds and Ends* (1998) or *American Splendor: On the Job* (1997). More recently (beginning with issue no. 17), Dark Horse has taken over Pekar's more substantial annual series as well.

Pekar himself is no artist, but he has a wonderful gift for storytelling and a superb ear for dialog. For each issue of *American Splendor*, Pekar hires free-lance artists whose work he appreciates. Pekar then provides the artists with stories, roughly laid out in comic book format. Pekar breaks the story down into individual panels, complete with stick figure drawings and dialog boxes.

Pekar's stories typically focus on the brief, unremarkable encounters that make up our daily lives, but which often go unnoticed in our preoccupation with weightier concerns. To borrow a well-worn phrase from television, *American Splendor* is a book "about nothing." Many of its stories feature Pekar himself as the main character. By all accounts (his own included), Pekar is eccentric, frenetic, obsessive, and anxiety-ridden, wedded to his daily routine and given to bouts of crankiness. To the author's credit, *American Splendor* pulls no punches in its autobiographical writing, por-

traying Pekar warts and all. Recent vignettes have included a wordless episode in which Pekar's coworker becomes mildly annoyed at the way the writer is eating a tangerine (think "seeds") and another in which Pekar obsesses over a mild fender-bender which caused no damage to either car. Many of Pekar's pieces involve little more than an unusual turn of conversational phrase which happens to catch the author's interest.

The series does not always focus on the activities and foibles of its author. In *American Splendor: Transatlantic Comics* (1998), Pekar brilliantly conveys the frustration and isolation felt by a mildly autistic young man who has taken the time to write Pekar a detailed, moving account of his life in Great Britain. Pekar has also used the pages of *American Splendor* as a forum for brief essays in which he introduces the reader to a little known, underappreciated jazz musician or novelist.

At its best, *American Splendor* is heartfelt, powerful, and tremendously insightful. At its worst, the book can become whiny and obnoxious, focusing on Pekar's increasing boredom with his clerical job, his obsession with early retirement, and his annoyance at failed deals to turn his writings into a motion picture. However, these negative, self-absorbed moments are an integral part of what makes *American Splendor* the remarkably honest work that it is, and such episodes are thankfully brief. *American Splendor* is highly recommended for any library interested in collecting so-called "serious" comics.

THE MASK (IRREGULAR CYCLE OF MINI-SERIES, 1991—)

He's mean and he's green. This darkly humorous title explores what various types of people do when handed ultimate power. The Mask is exactly that—an ancient mask, without any personality of its own. When someone puts on the mask, it bonds to their face—giving them a bald, green head—and that person becomes a human cartoon that mirrors his or her own inner psyche. Because the person is a cartoon, he is unkillable and can do all the tricks of Bugs Bunny. One problem is that while the mask is being worn, the person's psyche becomes twisted so that all inhibitions are lifted, including that against killing—especially if the wearer was a criminal to begin with. Dark Horse recently took "The Mask" to the silver screen as a very successful film featuring Jim Carrey, though the violence had to be toned down significantly in order to make the film appropriate for all audiences. Unfortunately for Dark Horse, the movie-going public did not associate the film with comic books, so the movie's popularity has not had a large impact on the sales of the comic book itself.[18]

The character of The Mask was created by Mark Badger and first appeared in *Dark Horse Presents* nos. 10-20. The character's current look took shape in a 1989 mini-series, called *Mayhem*, written by Chris Warner and drawn by John Arcudi and Doug Mahnke. Beginning in 1991, Dark Horse has published a cycle of Mask mini-series, typically issuing one four-issue cycle per year. Approximately eight *Mask* mini-series and several one-shots have been published to date, usually by different creative teams. The most recent four-issue series, entitled *The Mask: Toys in the Attic*, appeared in late 1998.

SERGIO ARAGONES GROO (IRREGULAR CYCLE OF MINI-SERIES, 1998—)

The central joke of Sergio Aragones' long-running series starring the world's dumbest barbarian is that hapless hero Groo has saved many people—unfortunately none of them have survived the experience. Groo, the mighty-thewed barbarian with legs like toothpicks and a potato-shaped nose, loves nothing more than a good "fray." Confronted by an army of enemy warriors, Groo thinks of wading into battle and single-handedly killing them all with his flashing swords. Although his prowess as a fighter is unmatched, the good-hearted simpleton usually manages to kill friend and foe alike, leaving a trail of carnage and smoldering villages in his wake.

Groo is the creation of artist Sergio Aragones and writer Mark Evanier, who introduced their loveable "Conan" parody in 1982 for a back-up story in the pages of *Destroyer Duck* 1. Since that time, the creator-owned character has starred in five separate series published by four different comics companies.[19]

Aragones is best known for his long-time work with *Mad* magazine, particularly his wordless "Marginal Thinking" gags and his "Mad Looks At..." series. The cartoonist was born in Spain but raised and educated in Mexico. He arrived in New York City in 1962 with little more than his extensive portfolio and the clothes on his back and was almost immediately hired by *Mad*.[20] Since that time, he has contributed to every single issue of the magazine, an unbroken record of more than thirty-five years. Along the way, the cartoonist studied mime with Marcel Marceau, an experience that strongly influenced his famous wordless gags. Aragones has also worked in the comic book industry since 1967, as well as doing extensive book illustration and

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television animation.[21] In 1977, Aragones was honored by the National Cartoonist Society, which awarded him the prestigious Reuben prize for "Cartoonist of the Year."

Collaborator Mark Evanier started in comics in 1969 and has written primarily for Marvel, DC, and Disney over the years. He has also worked in television since 1976, writing for dozens of situation comedies ("Welcome Back Cotter"), variety shows ("The Richard Pryor Show"), and animated cartoons ("Garfield and Friends").

The talented and prolific team of Aragones and Evanier has worked on *Groo* since 1982. They plot each issue together, then Aragones draws the panels and Evanier writes the script. The duo has also collaborated on several other comic book titles, notably Malibu's *Mighty Magnor.*

True to Dark Horse form, the latest *Groo* series is being produced as a cycle of limited series. Although only one mini-series has appeared so far (four issues, 1998), and the next project is not yet planned, it is clear that Dark Horse will be Groo's new home. The first Dark Horse story is a delightfully funny romp sure to satisfy new readers and long-time fans alike. Groo wanders to the Kingdom of Plentia, where he inadvertently drinks a "brainberry" potion. Brainberry is an addictive "stupefaction" drug which makes the drinker stupid, docile, and happy. Because Groo is already as dumb as a human being can become, the drug has the opposite effect of making him positively brilliant. Groo then uses his new-found intelligence to outwit his adversaries through clever planning, diplomacy, and complex feats of engineering. In the end, he foils the evil Prime Minister Nagoro's brainberry narcotics ring and returns to his normal dull-witted self.

The new Dark Horse series brings together many of the standard elements and running gags that Groo fans have come to expect, as well as a familiar cast of characters. No *Groo* story would be complete without Rufferto, Groo's loyal, intelligent, carnage-loving dog. In this story, the worshipful pup is completely baffled by Groo's changed behavior, particularly the barbarian's refusal to plunge headlong into mindless combat. The Sage, a wise old philosopher who speaks in aphorisms ("the surest path to chaos is too much organization"), also plays a prominent role. Other returning characters include the Sage's dog, Mulch; the evil witches, Arba and Dacarba; con man, Pal; and his bumbling sidekick, Drumm. The mini-series has already been reprinted in trade paperback form.

Dark Horse plans to publish a variety of Aragones projects and has issued two non-Groo series to date. *Sergio Aragones Louder Than Words* (six issues, 1997) showcases an anthology of all-new, wordless cartoons tackling typical Aragones subjects, from cheerful lechery to self-serving hypocrisy. The second series, *Sergio Aragones Boogeyman* (four issues, 1998), is a humorous horror anthology, with gleefully tasteless cartoons in the morbid style of Gahan Wilson or Charles Addams.

BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL (MONTHLY, B&W, 1996—)

The most popular title in the Dark Horse line of translated Japanese comics (called manga) is Hiroaki Samura's *Blade of the Immortal.* The comic describes the quest of Manji, a 17th-Century ronin. The setting is identical to that of *Usagi Yojimbo* (which is not a Japanese comic), but this is the only similarity between the two titles. Where *Usagi Yojimbo* uses anthropomorphic characters and downplays graphic violence, *Blade of the Immortal* deals with human protagonists and is extremely violent. The continuous bloodshed and dismemberment, coupled with adult themes such as rape and sexual obsession, earns the title a "mature readers" label. Where Usagi is a noble hero concerned with honor and helping others, *Blade of the Immortal*'s Manji is a cold, cynical anti-hero with a dishonorable past.

Manji begins his journey as a rogue samurai who has killed over 100 men. His reputation precedes him, in a manner similar to the legendary gunfighters of the American West. Manji is singled out by Yaobikuni, an irreverent, 800-year-old nun who practices the mystic arts. She infests Manji's body with magical "blood worms," capable of healing any wound, making the young ronin literally unkillable. Manji continues to ply his assassin's trade with the unique advantage of being immortal, but a series of events forces him to reexamine his career path. First, he kills his sister's husband in a duel, driving his sister to madness. Two years later, the sister is murdered by a street gang seeking to lure Manji into an ambush. The disheartened ronin then makes a deal with the irascible nun: if he kills one thousand "bad guys," Yaobikuni will remove Manji's curse of immortality.

In Japan, *Blade of the Immortal* is hugely popular due to writer/artist Samura's use of unusual, fictitious weapons and fighting styles. The book is also noteworthy because of its unique dialogue, which combines the

traditional speech patterns of feudal Japan with those of modern-day street punks. *Blade of the Immortal* enjoys a significant fan following in the United States due to its violent action. Fans in both countries appreciate Samura's explosive, dramatic artwork, haunting imagery, and in-your-face punk rock style.

Oh My Goddess! (Ongoing Cycle of Mini-Series, B&W, 1994—)

An entirely different style of manga comic is Kosuke Fujishima's *Oh My Goddess!*, which tells the story of Keiichi Morisato, a college student at a Japanese technical school. Keiichi discovers that the beautiful Belldandy is the love of his life and wishes he could always be with her. Only problem is, she's a goddess. Belldandy decides to grant his wish, but this results in her giving up immortality—leaving Keiichi with the woman of his dreams, but not the goddess of his dreams. *Oh My Goddess!* is mainly a humor title, best described as a combination of "Dobie Gillis" and "I Dream of Jeannie," as told from a Japanese point of view. The title chronicles a wide range of misadventures, as Belldandy uses her powers to help Keiichi and his friends triumph over competing clubs at school, all the while hiding Belldandy's true identity, foiling the schemes of rival student Aoshimi, suffering the mischievous pranks of the sexy half-demon Urd, and battling the occasional supernatural villain. Like most other manga titles published by Dark Horse, *Oh My Goddess!* appears as a quasi-series of successive linked mini-series. Like most Japanese comics, *Oh My Goddess!* is an acquired taste, but it remains one of Dark Horse's longer running manga titles, with a new issue hitting the stands virtually every month.

Notes and References

1. The Eisner awards (named for Will Eisner) and the Harvey awards (named for Harvey Kurtzman) are akin to the movie industry's Oscars and Golden Globes.

2. Gerard Jones and Will Jacobs, *The Comic Book Heroes* (Rocklin, CA: Prima Publishing, 1997), p. 305.

3. Randy Stradley, "A (Not So) Brief History of Dark Horse Comics," *Dark Horse Comics Web Site*, http://www.dhorse.com.

4. Jones & Jacobs, p. 322.

5. Major publishers such as Marvel and DC traditionally maintain the rights to all their characters, leaving the artists and writers who created them with no claim of ownership and no control over their fate.

6. Baron and Rude did not actually acquire the rights to their creation until Dark Horse purchased the title from First Comics. Despite the change in publishers, *Nexus* enjoyed continuous numbering, with issues 1-6 done by Capital, issues 7-80 by First, and 81-98 by Dark Horse.

7. "Edgar Rice Burroughs," *Contemporary Authors*, GaleNet database, Gale Research, http://www.galenet.gale.com.

8. Maurice Horn, "Tarzan," *100 Years of American Newspaper Comics* (New York: Gramercy, 1996), pp. 365-366.

9. This mini-series is not actually a comic book, but a serialized novel with sporadic illustrations by Michael Kaluta. Burroughs' uncompleted manuscript was fine-tuned and finished by science fiction author Joe R. Lansdale. The mini-series also reprints a collection of 1943 "John Carter of Mars" newspaper strips written and illustrated by John Coleman Burroughs.

10. Paul Chadwick, "Foreword," In *Concrete: the Complete Short Stories, 1986-1989* (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics, 1990), pp. 9-11.

11. Ron Goulart, *The Great Comic Book Artists, Volume 2* (New York: St. Martin's, 1986), p. 20.

12. Ellison's influential article called *Concrete*, "probably the best comic being published today, by anyone, anywhere." See Harlan Ellison, "It Ain't Toontown: Comic Books Are No Longer Kid Stuff," *Playboy* 35 (December, 1988): 162+.

13. Robert C. Harvey, *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), p. 259

14. For more on the "bad-girl" genre, see Michael R. Lavin's "Women in Comic Books," *Serials Review* 24 no. 2 (Summer 1998): 93-100.

15. Bruce Costa, "Usagi Yojimbo: 13 Years of Rabbit's Feats." *Comics Buyer's Guide* 1235 (July 18, 1997). The article can also be found on http://UsagiYojimbo.com

16. Harvey, pp. 235-237.

17. Ray Olson, "Our Cancer Year (Book Review)," *Booklist* 91 (September 15, 1994): 89.

18. "The Mask" has also been adapted as a Saturday morning TV show. Because the Dark Horse series is generally unsuitable for children, DC comics was given the rights to issue several mini-series for younger readers based on the show.

19. *Groo the Wanderer* (Pacific Comics, 8 issues, 1982-1984), *Groo the Wanderer*, series two (Marvel/Epic, 120 issues, 1985-1995), *The Groo Chronicles* (Marvel/Epic, 6 issues, 1989 reprints), *Groo* (Image, 6 issues, 1994-1995),

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and the current Dark Horse project. A fifth publisher, Eclipse Comics, also released a single *Groo The Wanderer Special* early in the character's history.

20. "Sergio Aragones," *Something About the Author* 48 (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1987), pp. 22-27.

21. Josef Woodard, "Cartoonist Has Been on the Cutting Edge for 30 Years: Sergio Aragones of Mad Magazine Does His Work in the Margins," *Los Angeles Times* (December 2, 1993): J-9.